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The political ambivalences of participatory planning initiatives

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relevance of combining multiple understandings of democratic politics to analyse the ambivalent and contentious dynamics of citizen participation in spatial planning. Building forth on the ongoing efforts in critical planning theory to overcome the deadlock between collaborative and agonistic oriented planning approaches, we argue for the refraining from 'over-ontologising' the question of democratic politics in planning processes, and start from the assumption that participatory planning processes as an empirical reality can accommodate radically different, even incompatible views on democracy. In addition, it is argued that while current planning scholars predominantly focus on the applicability of the collaborative and (ant) agonistic approach to democratic politics, a third approach – based on Jacques Rancière's notion of political subjectification grounded in equality – may be discerned. By mobilising an empirical study of a contentious participatory planning initiative in Ghent (Belgium), that is, the Living Street experiment, we illustrate that while different approaches to democratic politics do not necessarily align with each other, they are often simultaneously at work in concrete participatory planning processes and indeed explain their contentious nature.

KEYWORDS

conflict, democratic politics, Jacques Rancière, participatory planning, political subjectification, living street

INTRODUCTION

Participatory planning is trending among policy makers all over the world. It is presented as a tool to initiate spatial transformation, deepen democracy and improve spatial governance. On a theoretical level as well, there has been a renewed interest in this multifaceted phenomenon, with critical planning theorists examining whether and which types of citizen engagement can

be seen as the way forward in democratizing the planning system or exploring whether consensus or conflict oriented approaches to participation provide the best tools in understanding its transformative potential (Legacy, 2016; Aylett, 2010; Bäcklund and Mäntysalo, 2010; Monno and Khakee, 2012).

When it comes to analysing processes of citizen participation in planning, the collaborative planning approach and the agonistic planning approach have dominated the debate for the last two decades (Silver et al., 2010). Both approaches originate from the same dissatisfaction with the top-down, technocratic spatial planning practices that ruled the field in the post-war decades but provide different alternatives of what democrat politics in spatial planning practices entails. To that end, many of the planning scholars in the collaborative line of thinking find inspiration in Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (Innes and Booher, 2010; Healey, 2006; Forester, 1987), while adherents of the second strand take Chantal Mouffe's thinking on (ant)agonism as a starting point (Mouffe, 1999; Pløger, 2004; McClymont, 2011; Purcell, 2009; Hillier, 2003).

While initially these two approaches were positioned as fundamentally opposed to each other, in recent years there is a growing tendency of scholars attempting to overcome this rather dichotomizing view on participatory planning processes. Beaumont and Loopmans for example argue for a more 'hybridized' conception of participation (i.e. 'radicalized communicative rationality') in which a Habermasian 'ideal speech' situation is combined with bottom-up agonistic processes as Mouffe would foreground them (Beaumont and Loopmans, 2008). Bond develops an analytical framework in which Mouffe's ontology is privileged, but in which she co-opts principles of collaborative planning theory (Bond, 2011). Silver et al. (2010) and Aylett (2010) take a less 'ontologising' stance and propose an empirically informed perspective, in which both consensus-building and divisive social struggles are seen as different 'moments' in the same democratic planning process. They do accept that both perspectives may be incompatible on ontological grounds, but this does not at all preclude that actors in

participatory planning processes may draw inspiration from both perspectives to different degrees in different phases.

In this paper, we argue that in order to understand the complexities and ambivalences of actually existing participatory planning processes, we should refrain from ‘over-ontologising’ the question of democratic politics in planning processes and start from the assumption that participatory planning processes as an empirical reality can sustain and accommodate radically different, even incompatible views on democracy. By over-ontologising we mean the tendency in the academic debate on democratic politics to focus more on the ontological differences and incompatibilities between different approaches than on the empirical reality one wants to study, ignoring those empirical elements that do not fit in the chosen ontological point of view.

Building further on Silver et al.’s view (2010), which pleads for a more empirically grounded understanding of participation in planning processes, we claim that while different approaches to democratic politics may differ strongly from each other, they may occur alternately in the different phases of the participatory planning process or even simultaneously. We argue that this is the case due to the different actors involved in the spatial planning process being informed by different understandings of participation and the notion of democratic politics underlying it and using their (unevenly distributed) capacities to impose their understanding of participation on the planning process. Secondly, we argue that while current planning scholars predominantly focus on the applicability of the collaborative and (ant)agonistic approach to democratic politics, a third approach may be discerned. This third understanding of democratic politics, which is based on Jacques Rancière’s notion of political subjectification grounded in equality, has only recently started to emerge in planning theory but, as we will show in our empirical analysis, helps refraining from over-ontologisation and is useful to fully capture the empirical complexities of actually existing citizen participation.

The article begins with a brief and necessarily stylised review of the key aspects of Habermas’, Mouffe’s and Rancière’s thinking on democratic politics as applied in planning

literature: what is the nature of democratic politics, what is threatening democratic politics in spatial planning processes and who is the subject of democratic politics. To show the political ambivalences encountered when opening up public space for citizen participation, we mobilise a case of a contentious participatory planning initiative in Ghent (Belgium), i.e. the Living Streets-experiment. The case illustrates well how multiple approaches to democratic politics are often simultaneously at work in concrete participatory planning processes and indeed explain their contentious nature. Rather than presenting one definition of democratic politics as superior to the other, we highlight the relevance of combining multiple understandings of democratic politics to arrive at a deeper understanding of the ambivalent and contentious dynamics of citizen participation in spatial planning.

PLANNING THEORY AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The democratisation of spatial planning has been and is still argued for based on a range of approaches with different ontological stances. One well-established distinction in this context is between collaborative and agonistic approaches, the former inspired by among others the work of Jürgen Habermas on deliberation and the latter on Chantal Mouffe's work on the political (Beaumont and Loopmans, 2008; Bond, 2011). More recently, yet another approach has emerged, inspired notably by the work of Jacques Rancière, which stresses the importance of (disruptive) processes of subjectification in planning processes (Legacy, 2016; Gualini et al., 2015). We are not focused here on discussing the variety of understandings of, and nuances in different planning approaches, whether they are collaborative, agonistic or disruptive, but aim to distil the fundamental differences in how democratic politics are conceived in planning processes by the involved actors. We are therefore more concerned with (the authors of) the underlying social theoretical perspective than with the actual planning approach in all its nuances and complexity. We will now compare and contrast the three perspectives on democratic politics by analysing their views on the nature of de-politicisation (the suppression

of democratic politics) and of politicisation (the foregrounding of democratic politics) and their conception of the subject engaging in or being formed in democratic political practice.

Table 1. Three perspectives on democratic politics: Habermas (deliberation), Mouffe (agonism) and Rancière (disruption)

	Habermas	Mouffe	Rancière
Nature of de-politicisation	Lifeworld as privileged site for making sense of the world is colonized by instrumental rationality	Conflict and social division delegitimized by search for rational consensus	Specific distribution of the sensible/police order that is normalized and presented as given
Nature of democratic politics	The application of communicative rationality in ideal speech situation leading to rational consensus (deliberation)	Opposing political identities and building counter-hegemonic power (agonism)	(Temporary) dis-identification with given name, place and function and subjectification through claiming equality (disruption)
Subject of democratic politics	Rational and consensus-seeking individual, focused on common good	Passionate, (politically) identitarian and adversarial (but accepting legitimacy of adversaries)	Always in the making through assertion of equality as human being

The philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas has had a major influence on thinking about participation and spatial planning, most notably in the collaborative (Healey, 1992) or deliberative planning approaches (Forester, 1999). Habermas famously distinguishes the lifeworld and system world (Habermas, 1981: vi), with the lifeworld referring to shared values and assumptions that give meaning to everyday experiences (see also Innes and Booher, 2010: 23), while systems refer to rationalized processes (like economic, juridical or administrative systems) and are characterized by efficiency, calculability and control. These systems are dependent on the lifeworld for their legitimacy, since it is in the lifeworld that people create common assumptions on how things are supposed to work and on what is (not) fair.

The problem of late advanced capitalism, according to Habermas, is the colonisation of the lifeworld by instrumental rationality. This type of rationality is goal-directed and links means to

ends in the most efficient way (Habermas, 1981). This colonisation entails a crowding out of communicative rationality, which is rationality grounded in a mutual understanding of how things (should) work. A large amount of collaborative planners mobilise Habermas' understanding of instrumental rationality to criticise the reduction of spatial planning to a rational and comprehensive task carried out by experts (Innes and Booher, 2013; Dryzek, 1994). Having its main theoretical foundations in the Frankfurt School of critical sociology, much of the writing in collaborative planning is implicitly built on the assumption that planning is depoliticised because the lifeworld as the privileged site for making sense of the world is colonized by a range of instrumental rationalities promoted by experts and the highly rationalized systems through which they organise space.

To counter this, collaborative planning theorists argue that spatial planning decisions – in order to be truly democratic and hence politically legitimate – should be the result of a consensus reached through reasoning on the basis on well-founded arguments in the absence of coercion (ideal speech situation) (Habermas, 1979: 3; Forester, 1980; Booher and Innes, 2002).¹ The political subject of communicative rationality is hence a rational and consensus-seeking individual, which is focused on the common good (as defined through processes of deliberation) (see also Inch, 2015).

The political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has a very different view on the subject of democratic politics, although she would also reject the idea that the expert, as a manager of territory, is the primary democratic political subject. Mouffe refers to the latter – the predominance of a technical-managerial governance logic – as 'post-politics' (Mouffe, 2005). However, for Mouffe, the subject of democratic politics cannot be rational and consensus seeking, but is a subject – complex and always in the making (Mouffe, 1988) – that comes into being by opposing a 'constitutive outside', an 'other', an 'adversary' (Dikeç, 2012). In that sense,

¹ Not every collaborative planner is inspired by Habermas in the same way or to the same extent. Healey (2003) for example is more critical to his concept of 'ideal speech situation' than Booher & Innes (2002).

democratic political subjects are not consensus-seeking but adversarial, not just rational but also passionate and identitarian. Subjects thus become politicised through the development of counter-hegemonic narratives that can transform the existing power relations and establish a new hegemony (Purcell, 2009: 151-153).

Democratic politics, to Mouffe and followed by the agonistic planning approach (Metzger et al., 2015), is defined by a struggle between different political identities tied to opposing hegemonic projects that could never be reconciled rationally but depend as much on passions and that compete for power and influence (Mouffe, 2005: 21). Seen like this, it becomes clear that for Mouffe not only the 'instrumental rationality' criticised by Habermas is depoliticising, but also the search for a rational consensus that he proposes as an alternative. Habermas' framework erases antagonism from the public sphere (Mouffe, 1999). In Mouffe's political theory and the spatial planning approach that is inspired by her, antagonisms is immanent to all human societies and is precisely what gives rise to the political (Mouffe, 2005; Pløger, 2004).

At first sight the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, which more recently began to inspire spatial planning scholarship (Gualini, 2015; Metzger et al., 2015; Legacy, 2016; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012), carries some similarities with the approach of Mouffe. For Rancière, de-politicisation resides in a specific distribution of the sensible that is normalized and presented as given. This so-called 'police order' creates order in society by distributing places, names and functions (Nash, 1996) and determines what can be said, seen and done in a particular context by a particular person. Although the discourse reminds of Foucault, the stress on the 'givenness' of this distribution of places, names and functions (Dikeç, 2007: 17) also shows affinity with the notion of hegemony. Where Rancière clearly departs from Mouffe, however, is in his notion of the democratic political subject, or better the process of political subjectification (see also Davidson & Iveson, 2014; Dikeç, 2012).

Contrary to Mouffe, Rancière does not define a political subject as a group that becomes aware of itself, finds its voice, forms a counter-hegemonic bloc and imposes its weight on

society (Rancière, 1999: 40). Nor does he believe – as Habermas does – that the political is situated in subjects performing communicative reasoning in order to reach consensus on the common good. Rather, to Rancière political subjectification occurs beyond both the realm of power and rational dialogue, when a subject dis-identifies with the name, place or function assigned to it and thus disrupts the existing societal order (Kaika and Karaliotas, 2014). “It makes visible what had no business being seen, and... makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (Rancière, 1999, 30). This is not done by building counterhegemonic power or engaging in deliberation, but by claiming equality as a fellow human being and thus testing the democratic promise of equality between human beings on the unjust social order. Democratic politics then entails disrupting the symbolic order that constitutes society by giving everyone a particular name, place and function.

Although it may appear that Habermas’ ideal speech situation also upholds a notion of equality, it is conceived very differently. An ideal speech setting assumes a common lifeworld, where different opinions may each reflect one side of a multi-sided reality (Innes and Booher, 2010: 7) and where political debate implies that already existing political subjects are made to converge towards consensus through rational argumentation. To Rancière (and Mouffe as well), there is no common lifeworld. What is at stake in democratic politics, is what can be seen as an identity, interest or an opinion in the first place (Rancière, 1999: 55), about who is visible as a speaker able to utter and who is not. Political subjects, then, are not already established but are created in the disagreement. Additionally, while for collaborative planners equality is about giving people with different identities, interests and functions the same opportunities to voice their rational arguments at the negotiation table, Rancière sees this as a situation in which one group ‘gives’ equality while another group ‘receives’ it (May, 2009). For Rancière, society is instituted through a ‘distribution of the sensible’ that defines whose claims are understood as legitimate and whose are not, whose claims are recognized as comprehensible and whose are just seen as noise. This cannot be easily undone through rational arguments. Equality cannot be distributed but is asserted by people claiming equality against an unjust social order.

This is also different from Mouffe's understanding of democratic politics, which is based on antagonistic identities being created through the logic of the constitutive outside. To Rancière, a true political struggle is not a battle between enemies or adversaries, in which a political subject is created by its opposition to a different subject. Not identification with a particular group but (individual) dis-identification from society's symbolically constituted order stands central in Rancière's political thinking. While Mouffe sees the constitution of new bodies based on a constitutive outside as a precondition for the political, for Rancière the political ceases to exist when identitarian positioning ('we' vs. 'they') takes over. Dis-identification is by nature short-lived and eventually gives way to (new) forms of identification. To Rancière then, the political is always both temporal and a precarious act. "Political subjects are always on the verge of disappearing, either through simply fading away or, more often than not, through their re-incorporation, their identification with social groups or imaginary bodies" (Rancière, 2004: 7).

Now that we briefly discussed how Habermas, Mouffe and Rancière see de-politicisation, the nature of democratic politics and the subject of democratic politics, we will use this framework to analyse the political ambivalences in a case of participatory planning that triggered a lot of contention. We first give an introduction to the case-study of the Living Streets in Ghent's *Brugse Poort* and briefly discuss the applied methodology. In the empirical section, we then show how different visions on democratic politics can be observed when looking at different actors and different phases of the spatial planning conflict.

CONTENTIOUS PARTICIPATORY PLANNING IN A CHANGING POST-INDUSTRIAL NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE CASE OF THE LIVING AREA IN BRUGSE POORT, GHENT

The Living Street-concept originates in 2012, when a think-tank of public servants, citizens and business people brainstorms on Ghent's future with regards to sustainable mobility, a focus which coincides neatly with the city's ambition to become climate neutral by 2050. The

brainstorm results in a concept that combines a reduction of car usage with neighbourhood parking and participatory decision making. This so-called Living Street concept entails that residents redesign their street for a period up to two months, as such turning it into ‘the street of their dreams’. Residents who are interested in participating in this experiment are supported by ‘Trojan Lab’, a temporary non-profit organization founded for this purpose.² Trojan Lab provides the organising residents with logistic support, facilitates communication between the City administration and residents and mediates when conflicts arise. While residents are free to choose how to redesign their street, often however, the design includes a low-traffic or car-free zone, covering tarmac with artificial turf mats and replacing parking lots with colourful picnic tables, self-made flower boxes, street furniture and pop-up bars.



Figure 1. Living Street as it occurred in 2015 in *Brugse Poort*, a neighbourhood in the 19th- century belt of Ghent, Belgium. Source: Lab van Troje (www.leefstraat.be)

² As Trojan Lab explicitly aimed to be a temporary, experimental vehicle, it inscribed in its statutes that at the end of 2017 it would automatically dissolve.

The Living Street-experiment grew gradually, starting with 2 Living Streets in 2013, steadily increasing to 18 Living Streets in 2016.³ With 46 Living Streets already organised between 2013 and 2017, this initiative has become more and more embedded in the urban fabric of Ghent, while becoming popular in cities all over Europe as well.⁴ Cities like Amsterdam, Brussels, Utrecht and Rotterdam already experiment with their own version of the Living Street, other cities like Turin and Milton Keynes indicate to be interested in the concept.⁵ Adherents of the Living Streets praise the initiative for deepening local democracy, for its ability to encourage the feeling of togetherness in streets and for creating more urban greenery in the neighbourhood. From 2018 on, the City of Ghent took over the supporting role from Trojan Lab, hence anchoring the initiative in the city policy.

However, the Living Streets created many tensions as well, especially in the neighbourhood of *Brugse Poort*, a densely populated, disadvantaged and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in the 19th century belt of Ghent. In 2016, five Living Streets were organised at the same time in this neighbourhood, creating significant effects on the traffic situation in adjacent streets. This 'Living Area' generated higher tensions between residents than during previous experiments, leading to heated discussions between the City Council and opposition parties, with the latter disputing the legal and democratic basis of this initiative. In one street, an information panel was daubed with the text 'green selfish jerk's', in another street residents started a petition against the arrival of the Living Street. Before we explain our methodology and analyse the political dynamics around the Living Streets in the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood, we briefly introduce the neighbourhood and the set-up of the Living Area.

³ Source: <https://www.leefstraat.be/leefstraten/>, Accessed at 04/01/2018

⁴ In total 51 Living Street processes were initiated. Five Living Streets, however, did not occur because of the opposition in the street was too fierce. Some initiating teams also participated for several years consecutively.

⁵ Source: Staes, B., 2016, Europese steden komen Gentse leefstraten bestuderen, De Standaard, Oost-Vlaanderen, p. 31, 06/07/2016

Brugse Poort: a post-industrial neighbourhood in transition

Brugse Poort's chaotic street pattern and high density of buildings originate from the 19th century, when the textile and steel industry settled in the area, attracting a mass of labourers for whom new houses were built in an unplanned fashion (Oosterlynck and Debruyne, 2013). When the textile industry started declining from the 1930s onwards, *Brugse Poort* deteriorated in physical as well as socio-economic terms. Since the 1970s, the population ethnically diversified when labour migrants with mainly Turkish and Maghreb roots came settling in the neighbourhood. When in 2004 and 2007 Slovakia and Bulgaria joined the European Union, an influx of Eastern European migrants further diversified this neighbourhood.⁶ Since the second half of the 1990s, a growing number of white middle class families came settling in *Brugse Poort* (see also Loopmans et al., 2012; Oosterlynck & Debruyne, 2013; Goossens & Van Gorp, 2017). This is partly the result of an urban renewal program implemented to increase the liveability in the neighbourhood and partly because of the availability of relative cheap housing in the neighbourhood.

Despite gentrification, today *Brugse Poort* remains one of the poorer, densely populated and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods of Ghent. In 2013, about half of the population living in this district had a foreign background. The population density is 4,5 times higher than the city's average, and the average annual income per taxpayer in *Brugse Poort* lies 20% below the average annual income on city level.⁷

Brugse Poort became acquainted with the Living Street-concept in 2015, in the third year that Trojan Lab was actively experimenting with the concept in Ghent. In that year, two streets participate. (see Figure 1) The year after, from mid-May to mid-July 2016, Trojan Lab expands

⁶ Source: <https://stad.gent/brugse-poort-rooigem/over-de-wijk/geschiedenis-van-brugse-poort-rooigem>, Accessed at 04/01/2018

⁷ Source: <https://gent.buurtmonitor.be/>, Accessed at 04/01/2018

the experiment in *Brugse Poort*, hoping to learn more about what it means to have several Living Streets in one neighbourhood at the same time. In total, five groups of initiators are found, each creating their own Living Street. While on some occasions, these teams join forces, each Living Street had its own interpretation of the experiment. Four teams opt for a complete cut of traffic in their Living Street, while the other team chooses to work with parklets, thus keeping space for car traffic to pass through the street. Because of the four cuts, traffic in the neighbourhood is diverted quite drastically, affecting not only residents in the specific Living Streets but in the entire neighbourhood.



Figure 2. Scheme of the five Living Streets occurring in 2016 in *Brugse Poort*, in which the dark purple strips mark a road cut for cars, the light purple strips with arrow suggest a Living Street with a passageway for cars and the red arrows refer to an adjusted travel direction.

Source: Lab van Troje, own adaptations. (www.leefstraat.be)

Data and methods

We used different methods to retrieve the data that were used in the analysis. Firstly, we analysed relevant news articles⁸ and social media to get a first sense of how the Living Street experiments were received by different actors and social groups in Ghent between 2012 and 2016. Secondly, we carried out observations on public hearings and meetings organized by Trojan Lab⁹. We analysed a range of documents provided by Trojan Lab¹⁰ and did in-depth interviews with 3 staff members of the non-profit organization to get a better insight in the organisation's line of thinking and their motivation to promote Living Streets.

Thirdly, we held in-depth interviews with 29 residents of Living Streets and streets surrounding the Living Streets in *Brugse Poort*, reflecting upon their experiences with regards to the Living Streets edition of the summer in 2016. For the interviews with initiators of Living Streets, we received contact details from Trojan Lab. Other interviews were arranged, either by meeting respondents on a feedback moment of Trojan Lab, either by inhabitants responding to an advertisement on social media or by snowball sampling asking interviewed initiators whether they know non-initiators in their street who would be interested to give their insights. By opting for several ways of contacting respondents, we aimed to maximize the diversity of respondents. As our sample of interviewees contains mostly residents with strong (positive or negative) opinions on the Living Streets, we were probably less successful in reaching out to those who are indifferent or ambivalent on the issue of the Living Streets. Given our focus on political dynamics, this form of underrepresentation is perhaps less problematic, but should

⁸ 'GoPress Academic', the Belgian electronic database which contains all articles from the main Belgian newspapers and magazines, was searched between the period of 01/01/2012 and 31/12/2016, using the search code (Leefstraat OR Leefstraten) AND Gent (140 articles).

⁹ The meetings referred to dealt with the evaluation of the 'Living Area' in Brugse Poort. The attended public hearings of Trojan Lab were sometimes intended for the residents of Brugse Poort, but on other occasions organized for interested residents of other cities or urban planning scholars and practitioners.

¹⁰ These include (i) two reports published by Trojan Lab in which they combine essays of their own members, politicians, academics, residents of a Living Street and other experts reflecting on the Living Streets (2015; 2018); (ii) a registration form filled in by Trojan Lab to win the 'At home in the City' prize (2014).

nevertheless be borne in mind when assessing our argument. In order to substantiate our findings and get a better understanding of the neighbourhood's dynamics in general, we also carried out an in-depth interview with the community worker responsible for the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood. Both the interviews and the attended public meetings occurred between June and December 2016, i.e. the period during and after that the Living Area took place in *Brugse Poort*.

THE POLITICAL AMBIVALENCES OF PARTICIPATORY PLANNING IN GHENT'S LIVING STREETS

We now turn to our empirical analysis of the political dynamics that played out around the Living Streets in the neighbourhood *Brugse Poort*. We will analyse how different actors in the planning process work with different understandings of what constitutes democratic politics.¹¹ This implies that one cannot understand the political dynamics around the Living Street solely on the basis of one particular (often normatively grounded) understanding of democratic politics. Approaching the definition of democratic politics as an empirical question and democratic politics as something that acquires its meaning in the planning process itself, offers an alternative to 'over-ontologising' the nature of democratic politics and is thus a good entry point in understanding the (often ambivalent) political dynamics in participatory planning processes. More concretely, we will identify specific understandings of democratic politics and their interaction by following the unfolding of the planning process in the case of the Living Streets.

¹¹ When we argue that different actors in the planning process work with different understandings of what constitutes democratic politics, we refer to general tendencies and do not claim that there could be no exceptions to these general tendencies.

Turning the street into a site for communicative rationality

The ambitions of those setting up the Living Streets in Ghent reflect a strong commitment to re-establish communicative rationality in a space that over the past decades has been colonised by the instrumental rationality of car mobility.¹² When asked what Trojan Lab intended to achieve with the Living Street experiment, the answer is “*we want to give back the street to the residents*”.¹³ The Alderman of Mobility, who strongly supports the Living Street experiments, argues that “*the public domain is for everyone, not only for those driving a car*”.¹⁴ He argues that in many Western cities the function of the street is predefined by traffic circulation and street users identified as car drivers. Both the Trojan Lab members and the Alderman see in this initiative a way of creating a democratic debate on other possible uses of the street. Once the dominance of car mobility is lifted, streets are opened up for other functions and users, which are often characterised as ‘weaker’ because they get easily squeezed out or (literally) pushed to the margins by car use. As a Trojan Lab member explains:

“The most important issue to us is: ‘how to become neighborhood again?’. For some it is about his car, for the other it is about a neighbour who is not talking to him. For yet someone else, it is about having a street and occupying this street and for others it is about working at

¹² We substantiate this claim by a reflection made by one of the founders of the Living Streets project arguing that “*The Living Street radically turned the [...] normal course of events concerning dealing with public domain upside down. Residents received the experimental space to temporarily deal with their street environment differently. The two central ingredients [of this project] were to first limit the claim of traffic and mobility in surface area and then deal with the vacated space in a different way, and this only for a limited period of time. For this, one did not directly approach the system world. Instead the public domain was once again used as a medium to convey a certain message to the competent authority, but now in the language of the residents themselves.*” (Scheirs, 2015, p.34). Earlier in this reflection the founder already described that until now designing streets was primarily reserved to designers and the Government (p.34), and that designing was about ‘car size’ instead of ‘people size’ (p.33).

¹³ Deschamp as cited in Van Synghele, B., 2013, Stad krijgt drie leefstraten, Het Laatste Nieuws, Gent-Wetteren-Lochristi, pg 17, 11/04/2013

¹⁴ Watteeuw as cited in Van Synghele, B., 2014, 'Speciaalstraten' bij de vleet in Gent, Het Laatste Nieuws, Gent-Wetteren-Lochristi, pg. 20, 13/05/2014

night and wanting to rest. You name it. And then you notice that everyone is [living behind closed doors]. How can we break out of this [pattern] again?" (member Trojan Lab, 2016).

What becomes visible here is the firm ambition to use the street to create common lifeworlds. To do so, the streets must become truly 'public' again, a meeting place of all kind of uses and visions rather than one determined by the instrumental (and thoroughly individualising) logic of through-passing traffic and parking.

For Trojan Lab, inclusive decision-making in (temporary) re-designing streets is of utmost importance, emphasizing the necessity of deliberation, both between residents and between residents and the City administration (as accessibility for the fire department, garbage collection, the emergency services etc. must be guaranteed). They stimulate initiators of a Living Street to go from door to door, consult each resident of the street on how they would like the street to change. The final set-up of the Living Street should hence be the result of deliberation, which includes as much as possible the wishes and concerns of all residents, but with a firm focus on shared concerns and the common good rather than on individual desires. One initiator says:

"We were actually obliged to say: everything you want for yourself, put that aside and talk to everyone in the street and confront them with the question 'what would you like?'. We have done that. [...]. So that was very intensive. [...]. And then it turned out that -we felt- there were quite a few people with the same kind of concern: People drive too fast [in our street], let us do something about that. Perhaps that was the most shared concern". (resp. 05, organizing resident of Living Street, 2016)

A Trojan Lab member points out:

"A Living Street cannot depart from your own idea about how it should be organised, [...] it should depart from a common vision. [...] when you do something of which everyone gets better, you'll get better yourself as well" (Vilain, 2015).

In their aim of creating a shared idea on what the street should look like, Trojan Lab and initiators draw heavily on rational argumentation. For example, when opponents raise their fear that the Living Street-experiment would threaten the availability of parking spaces in the neighbourhood, initiators propose that for every parking space occupied by a Living Street, someone would voluntarily put his or her car on a neighbourhood parking. Or when someone raises concerns of not being able to easily drive to his or her house, initiators give examples of how they themselves navigate through the neighbourhood. This deliberative dialogue between neighbours also leads to the adaptation of plans to make streets (temporary) car-free. In one of the Living Streets, residents decided not to ban traffic from the street as this would exclude less mobile residents. One Living Street resident recalls:

“So in [our street], cars could still pass [during the Living Street]. With the neighbours, we asked to do so because there is a neighbour who is not that mobile. There is also another neighbour whose husband needs nursing. [...]. [We wanted] for those people that the doctor could drive [through the street] and the nurse could come”. (resp. 04, non-initiating resident in Living Street, 2016)

Some residents see glimpses of what we earlier called a ‘common lifeworld’ in the process of creating and realising Living Streets. They claim that by engaging in dialogue, neighbours learn to know and respect each other’s context, hence making it easier to come to a commonly agreed end result. One Living Street organiser says:

“I learned to know way more people [...] even neighbours who didn’t like what we do. You address them on the street and you get to know them. [...] You know the stories even more than before, you know who lives in the neighbourhood and you get a piece of history”. (resp. 05, organising resident of Living Street, 2016)

Another organiser explains how the common life world is experienced:

“[...] everyone is involved. The day that we build the Living Street is great. That first day, everyone comes outside, the turf mats are rolled out, flags are hung... It gives an immense feeling of

togetherness because you have worked on it yourself. Everyone has been involved, the whole street, everyone has had multiple opportunities to join in, to work out the ideas". (resp. 07, organising resident of Living Street, 2016)

However, opening up the street for communicative rationality about the streets' possible futures gave rise to forms of subject formation that highlight the shortcomings of Habermas' view of the political subject as rational and focused on the common good. In the next section, we focus on how the Living Streets in the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood are confronted with fierce contestation and analyse the political dynamics and subject formation that is taking place in and through this phase of contestation.

Urban sustainability as a hegemonic narrative

In *Brugse Poort*, the participatory planning initiative of the Living Streets soon ran into fierce opposition. The terms in which opponents frame their contention with the Living Streets is very far removed from Habermasian discourse of rational consensus-seeking in ideal speech situations. Opponents perceive it as a power struggle between different social groups with different societal positions and resources pushing very different ideas of what makes a neighbourhood liveable. Against the discourse on deliberative democracy of Trojan Lab and its supporters, they present the neighbourhood as socially divided and use identitarian terms to describe their adversary (and themselves).

Residents opposing the Living Streets say:

"And now with these Living Streets, they really make me crazy. You settle in a neighbourhood, a working-class neighbourhood, an authentic neighbourhood and then you say "and now we're going to make it liveable". [...] what an arrogance, to say "we just lay some artificial turf mats, and we put ourselves in the middle of the street [...]". [...]. How arrogant can you be to do such a thing?". (resp. 19, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

"The problem now is that there are people who came living in the neighbourhood and got a cheap house. And what happens? They begin to set their own laws here. [...] They begin to change your lifestyle. [...] not everyone is lucky like those people who sit there all day with their wine. Not everyone is lucky enough to work from home. [...] I have problems with it because I am a taxi driver, you understand? We always try to be with a customer within 15 minutes". (resp. 24, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

"A lot of alternative types, which is not per se a bad thing, bought and renovated a house in the neighbourhood, and came living here. And in fact, and this has happened gradually, now they are in power in the street and in the neighbourhood". (resp. 25, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

Around these newly emerging social divisions, new identities – or political subjects – take shape. In a post-industrial neighbourhood like the *Brugse Poort* the term 'newcomers' changed meaning. In the past decades, it referred to low income non-European migrants and highlighted the (perceived) shift in local social hierarchy between the established (and often impoverished) white working class and the incoming non-European migrants (Oosterlynck and Debruyne, 2013). Now, the term newcomer increasingly refers to new (white) urban middle classes and reflects a growing unease of the established population with the shift in power relations in the neighbourhood. It creates new forms of solidarity among the opponents of the Living Streets, between certain residents with a white working-class background and families with Turkish background to whom those who 'attack' car usage became a shared enemy. As one Living Street organiser recalls:

"In that sense, the conflict brought cohesion on both sides of the conflict. Not only on the side of the adherents of the Living Streets, but also at the side of the opponents. And it is cross-cultural. In that sense you can say it [i.e. the Living Streets] strengthened the social cohesion, because John [i.e. an autochthonous opposing neighbour who lived in Brugse Poort for more than 20 years] never chatted as much with his Turkish neighbours than over the last two years". (resp. 06, initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

In other words, the usage of a car determines the 'constitutive outside' for the community of opponents. In this context, 'the car' and 'the cargo bike' (i.e. a mode of transportation often linked to white, progressive middle-class families) serve no longer as merely functional vehicles to move yourself around but became powerful signifiers of the social group to which residents belong and their status in the city. A local taxi driver with a migrant background and long-term resident claims:

"I am a stranger in my own neighbourhood ... We have the impression that we don't have anything to say here anymore. [...] And that creates a feeling of "you come home, you get in, you close the door and you do not want to do anything outside anymore"". (resp. 24, non-initiating resident of Brugse Poort, 2016)

The contentious dynamics triggered by the Living Streets-initiative show how – at least in this case – deliberative planning processes do not succeed in playing down social divisions and working towards a joint understanding of the common good. Despite the sustainability discourse surrounding the Living Streets, the initiative is not seen by opponents as a contribution towards the common good, but as a claim for hegemony of one particular group in the neighbourhood. Opposing residents hence do not experience the (temporary) reduction of cars in their streets as enabling the creation of a 'common life world'. As residents explain:

"But one time, we went sitting there as well, and after an hour, an hour and a half, we did have the feeling that if you are not part of that gang, [...] you don't completely belong there. I guess that's logical, it's in every social company like that I think [...]". (resp. 14, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

"I have already spoken to those people and I do not understand them and they do not understand me. We see things so very differently, I cannot understand". (resp. 19, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

Opponents of the Living Streets are keen to point out that the Living Streets are part of a 'bigger plan'. It is not just as an attempt of newly arrived middle class families to 'take over'

their neighbourhood by claiming public space and impose their lifestyles on others, but part of the City Council's general policy vision to transform the city according to their social-ecological vision.¹⁵ As one resident claims:

"[But] to me, it's so much more [than those Living Streets]. It's everything. It's that traffic circulation plan, it's Watteeuw [i.e. Alderman of Mobility], it's those Living Streets, it's the entire neighbourhood... For me, they are birds of a feather. And yes, Brugse Poort is changing ...". (resp. 19, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

Living Street opponents point out that because the vision of the new white urban middle-class residents is aligned with the City Council's socio-ecological vision for the city, they have easy access to governing politicians. The way Living Street proponents use extra-local resources to tilt the balance of power in the neighbourhood in their favour gives rise to strong feelings of disempowerment among opponents. Opponents feel that Living Street initiators can do whatever they want, with the support of the current City Council.

"Yeah, those families [i.e. those organising the Living Streets] can afford everything and get everything they ask for. [...]. They have connections, they know their way around. They have ties to Tom Baltazar [i.e. then Alderman of Environment and Social Affairs], they have connections with that man. They have connections with Watteeuw. [i.e. Alderman of Mobility]". (resp. 25, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

"I went to that meeting before the Living Streets started. And the majority [of the people that were there] was against it, literally! Trojan Lab explained it all so very well, and then I raised my finger and said 'are you going through with this? Are we here to give our thoughts or are we just here to hear what you're up to? Because if you've already decided everything, it makes no sense that I'm

¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, the City of Ghent aims to become climate neutral by 2050. Apart from the Living Streets, plenty of other initiatives taken by the City of Ghent already endorse this ambition, ranging from the introduction of a 'traffic circulation plan' (i.e. a plan to reduce traffic in the city centre) to the financial support of ecological bottom-up initiatives like local farming projects and the promotion of urban commons initiatives (Devolder and Block, 2015).

wasting my time here because then it's going through'." (resp. 25, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

These strong feelings that the relationships of power in the neighbourhood and beyond are working to their disadvantage explain why opponents do not regard attempts to engage in dialogue from Trojan Lab and other proponents as sincere. In this context, attempts to engage in 'rational argumentation' is often seen by opponents as proof that they only want to convince them and push through their Living Streets projects anyway.

What they [i.e. Living Street initiators] say is "but in the past you did not have a parking space either". That is true, I also had to drive around but at least I was driving around. [...]. But they have an answer to everything, most of it I find irrelevant". (resp. 19, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)

"I think they [i.e. Living Street initiators and the City of Ghent] are laughing with us. It becomes so incredibly annoying. It's always that same nagging. [...] After a while, you even find yourself becoming a nag. Because it is useless, it does not change anything. I just find it horrible that they do not take anyone into account. It's like [they say] 'this is how it's going to be and you will just have to accept it'". (resp. 21, non-initiating resident of Brugse Poort, 2016)

Trojan Lab members and City officials went out of their way to cool down tensions between residents with feedback moments and other mediation attempts. They also tried to include key figures of the Muslim community in *Brugse Poort* in their project, but they often did not succeed, neither were they able to maintain the image of neutral mediator. As opponents resisted the role of rational, consensus seeking subjects, but highlighted the unequal power relations and let their attitude towards the Living Streets also be determined by feelings of disempowerment, what was meant to be an ideal speech situation in which residents openly discussed the future of their street, (partially) became a battle field between opposing identitarian political subjects.

Alternative modes of subjectification?

The dynamics of contention around the Living Streets seem to have reached a stalemate, with two fundamentally different understandings of democratic politics clashing with each other and providing little perspective on how one might move beyond it, except for the exercise of power. Still, there are glimpses of a third understanding of democratic politics, which may make the contention of the Living Streets productive of new democratic opportunities. This third understanding of politics resembles Rancière's vision and does not reduce (or even focus) on the notion of (hegemonic) power as the core of democratic politics nor turns a blind eye to the very real limits of communicative rationality as the basis for democratic politics. Both the Habermasian and Mouffe-inspired approaches have an important flaw, namely that in both approaches the political subject is predefined. For the Habermasian approach, a subject becomes political when it uses rational argumentation to come to a shared lifeworld, while to Mouffe, a subject becomes political through building a counter-hegemonic power, also using passions and identity markers in the process. A Rancièrian approach revolves around the notion of equality as the promise of any democracy. Although banning or reducing car traffic from public streets is a pre-condition for proper democratic politics, as the Living Streets proponents argue, that alone is not enough as its opponents claim that not everyone is in a position to speak as equal human being. The latter implies a situation in which one is willing to hear and make room for other voices than those of the highly articulate and well-reasoned members of the new urban middle classes and their widely circulating discourses on sustainable and liveable cities. It implies a situation in which one is responsive to utterances not couched in rational and argumentative terms. The Living Streets have the potential to allow for non-identitarian political subjects to emerge. A Living Street organiser describes a process of dis-identification of the streets and its users of the 'name, places and function' given to them in car-oriented urban societies (but also the difficulties involved):

“Many people believe [...] streets are created for cars. Recently we had an evaluation moment [on the Living Streets] and some of the people were saying: “We have the right to park our car and drive in this street”. I even had a discussion about this with my partner. For me, the discussion already starts with this given, because I do not feel like that. [...] I think: “where does this right come from?”. I do not think a car has more right to be there than for example a family who wants to picnic. But yes, my partner also says, “Well, that’s a public road, it is supposed to drive on.” But how did it actually become like this? It could also be used differently”. (resp. 17, organising resident of Living Street, 2016)

By banning or reducing car traffic, the experiment created space for dis-identification from the existing symbolic order and its acceptance of the dominance of motorized vehicles on public streets. However, as we described in the previous section, for a significant section of the residents this potential for dis-identification, almost immediately turned into (an exclusionary) identification, as the involved people were quickly identified with one of two opposing and identitarian defined camps (e.g. car versus bike users).

In the Living Street case, there is no disruptive moment in which an actor, which was up until then unheard and unseen, claims equality and through speaking becomes a new political subject, but there are several moments in which the promise of democracy to be able to speak as equals is hinted at. We claim that these moments reflect more than just the longing for a Habermas-like ideal speech situation, but through their concern with a re-organisation of the categories through which we speak – of the roles, names and places given to people – are more in line with Rancière’s focus on equality as the ground from which political subjectification emerges and offer a potential way out of the stalemate reached. We discuss two of these instances.

A first instance is in the opponent’s refusal to accept a de-politicized conception of ‘sustainability’ as promoted by Living Street proponents and the City Council. By equating the notion of sustainability with more greenery and less car usage, the content of the term has

been fixed on a primordially ecological foundation. Social (power) relations are hardly addressed in this sustainability discourse (Swyngedouw, 2013). Opponents of the Living Streets argue that sustainability discourses need to take into account the socio-economic needs of citizens with car-related jobs (resp. 24) or jobs with irregular hours (resp. 22; resp. 10) – a job that they need to *sustain* themselves and their family – but also the situation of less mobile citizens (resp. 21) who may need cars to remain mobile and sustain their social life. By doing so, they broaden the experiential basis from which the meaning of sustainability is articulated and claim equality in determining what makes a city sustainable.

A second glimpse of attempts at egalitarian subjectification are to be found in the way opponents link the Living Street experiment to a broader and ongoing sociological transformation of the city (mostly referred to as (green) gentrification) and the implication of policy-making in this process. This link not only reflects hegemonic thinking (as described earlier in this article), but also reflects the notion of ‘equal intelligence’ as described by Rancière (2007). Regardless of their social and political contexts, Rancière argues that all human beings are capable of creating meaningful lives with one another, talking with one another, understanding one another, etc. Hence, all human beings share an equal intelligence (May, 2009: 7). When confronted with this assertion, Trojan Lab vehemently rejected this link, claiming that they were only responsible for the Living Streets and that they should not be drawn into wider debates on local policy-making.¹⁶ The opponents’ reference to citywide evolutions were dismissed by Living Street proponents, setting these residents aside as ‘embittered people’, thus refusing to hear their voices and denying their ‘equal intelligence’. When asked why some residents are against measures to reduce car traffic in the city, two Living Street proponents answer: “[They are] conservative, I think. [...] A Trump voter.” (resp.6); “This person is against everything really. An embittered person in fact. [...] It is impossible to talk with this person. It is impossible to negotiate with him.” (resp. 7). By refusing the debate to be

¹⁶ This claim is based on feedback given by Trojan Lab when we presented them our analysis of our study.

narrowed down to the Living Street experiment, opponents may be said to engage in egalitarian subjectification, a process which quickly becomes identitarian presumably due to not being heard nor seen by others.

To conclude then, although the Living Streets have the potential to disrupt the symbolic order of streets dominated by car mobility and give rise to new political subjects, there are clear limits to the deliberative approach pursued by Trojan Lab. Debates on the (temporary) redesign of streets seem to take place within a rather narrow ecologically oriented notion of sustainability that does not take into account the full range of life experiences as related to different labour market positions or health conditions. Similarly, the framework for debate, within which rational arguments can be exchanged, is a priori restricted to the Living Streets initiative and interventions that point out the relationship between Living Streets and broader, partially policy-induced societal transformations of the neighbourhood are dismissed as not relevant. In this context, processes of egalitarian subjectification are suppressed and what was aimed to be a participatory planning process runs into serious opposition. What the third perspective on democratic politics has on offer then is an understanding of equality that is deeper than the one offered by Habermas: one in which there is no assumption of a common lifeworld and in which equality entails the very possibility to dis-identify from and disrupt the very names, places and functions that organize the so-called common lifeworld.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we analysed the political ambivalences of participatory planning processes and focused on the dynamics of contention that play out when public streets are opened up for citizen participation. Our focus in this article lies on what it is that makes a planning process political or de-politicised and what is the political subject that acts in participatory planning processes. We distinguished three approaches and started from the by now well-known debate between deliberative and agonistic approaches, inspired respectively by Habermas' theory of

communicative action and Mouffe's vision on (ant)agonism. Additionally, we introduced the somewhat newer (at least in spatial planning debates) ideas of Jacques Rancière, arguing that his vision on democratic politics does not reduce it to a rational exchange of arguments neither to power struggles. For Rancière, the political subject is neither a rational, consensus-seeking citizen, nor an adversary in a struggle, but a subject-in-the-making that is involved in an open-ended dis-identification from a given symbolic order. In this context, we argued against the over-ontologisation of debates on democratic politics and for an empirical approach that is attentive to different understandings of what constitutes democratic politics and political subjects. It is precisely this theoretically informed, yet empirical approach of political dynamics that leads to a richer understanding of the contentious nature of participatory planning processes.

In line with our call for theoretically informed empirical analysis, we analysed the ambivalent political dynamics at play in the case of the Living Streets in the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood in Ghent, Belgium. We showed that while the different approaches to democratic politics do not align with each other, all three can be seen to operate in this particular case of participatory spatial planning. This is the case because different actors operate on a different understanding of what constitutes democratic politics and the (often) contentious interactions between actors can be partially brought back to these different understandings. An analytical approach in which different understandings of democratic politics are combined is therefore required to fully capture the ambivalent dynamics of participatory planning processes. The Habermasian notion of democratic politics is promoted by Trojan Lab. Convinced of both the desirability and possibility to reach consensus through inclusive deliberation, Trojan Lab sets up a participation planning trajectory in which rational argumentation and focus on the common good was of major importance. Although this approach did result in a number of successful, collaborative outcomes, we also observed how the Living Street experience in the neighbourhood became tainted by adversarial and identitarian politics, creating unexpected and unwanted polarization around the issue of car usage and making visible that for at least a significant section of the

population there is no common lifeworld. A Rancière-based approach very much concurs with the observation that there is no common lifeworld, but – as we suggested – also offers a way to move beyond the stalemate that comes about through the opposition of a deliberative and hegemonic approach. Although no full-blown process of egalitarian subjectification can be observed in the Living Streets case study, there are claims to equality and of equal intelligence visible in the unfolding of the planning process, e.g. when residents bring other life experiences to bear on the notion of sustainability or link the Living Street initiatives to a broader sociological transformation of the neighbourhood. We suggest that the partial failure of the deliberative approach in the Living Street initiative to capture all democratic political energy in the neighbourhood can be explained by a notion of equality and political subject formation that is too limited.

To conclude, this paper has shown the added value of combining different understandings of democratic politics in participatory planning processes. A theoretically informed empirical analysis can explain the often ambivalent and contentious nature of participatory planning trajectories by referring to how different involved actors operate on different understandings of democratic politics. This conclusion leads to questions that can be explored in further research. More could be said and learned about the interaction between the three understandings of democratic politics. By way of inspiration, we mention two questions on this interaction. Firstly, although Rancière rejects a notion of democratic politics that is tied to unequal relations of power, when applied to empirical reality, it is impossible to ignore the role that power plays in the suppression of processes of egalitarian subjectification. This leads to conceptual questions on how – if Rancière is used to inform empirical analysis – power can be brought into the analysis, perhaps on a different ontological level than at which the nature of democratic politics is defined. Secondly, and relatedly, in their shared attempt to evacuate power from the site of democratic politics, Habermas and Rancière have perhaps somewhat more in common than one might think on face value. This is for example clear from the way that the initial moment of the Living Street initiatives both has elements of deliberation as well

as dis-identification. An important difference between both approaches of course resides in the degree to which they see the symbolic order as something that can be shared or something that inevitably excludes and silences some people. Further empirical research can however help to clarify whether a rapprochement between these two approaches is possible.

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